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General Accounting Office
Washington, D.C. 20548

Accounting and Information
Management Division

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December 11, 1995

The Honorable Doris M. Meissner
Commissioner, Immigration and
Naturalization Service

Dear Ms. Meissner:

On November 9, 1995, we met with senior members of your information resources management (IRM) team to discuss our observations regarding the Immigration and Naturalization Service's (INS) efforts to develop and implement an information technology (IT) investment strategy. We conducted this work because INS officials indicated that they could spend over \$700 million on IT within the next 3 fiscal years to better meet mission goals and objectives and to improve long-standing weaknesses in manual processes and automated systems. Our work was intended to be an initial assessment and not an exhaustive review of the status of INS' efforts to begin managing information systems projects as investments.

We believe INS' efforts to adopt the practices endorsed by leading private and public organizations to improve mission performance and reduce costs are a step in the right direction.¹ INS has begun to improve IRM leadership, emphasize the need for strategic planning, and establish an IT investment strategy. The implementation of the investment strategy, however, is in its early stages. Based on the best practices of leading organizations, there are several critical areas that will need to be addressed. The following represents agreements reached with your staff on additional actions to better ensure that the strategy is effective in improving INS' ability to implement reliable information systems and bring about mission benefits.

¹These practices are included in such documents as our report, Executive Guide: Improving Mission Performance Through Strategic Information Management and Technology (GAO/AIMD-94-115, May 1994); the Government Performance and Results Act of 1993; OMB Circular A-130, "Management of Federal Information Resources"; and the Federal Information Resources Management Regulation (FIRMR 201-20.001).

- (1) While INS senior managers are clearly involved in many IT decisions, INS needs to establish a fully functioning investment review board to ensure that senior managers are routinely involved in making key IT decisions and that these decisions are made from an overall, agencywide investment perspective. As demonstrated by leading organizations, a formal investment review board helps ensure that IT projects selected are cost-effective and have the potential to provide significant mission benefits.
- (2) To its credit, INS has begun to develop general IT selection criteria, such as those relating to business impact, mission results, and systems architecture. However, these criteria need to be defined completely and explicitly so they can be used consistently to assess and rank all IT projects—both ongoing and planned. This would provide the investment review board with essential information to help prioritize information systems projects, manage risks, and make trade-offs for all investments agencywide.
- (3) INS should prepare cost-benefit analyses for all information system projects, including the Automated Biometric Identification System and the Enforcement Case Tracking System (ENFORCE). Further, the cost-benefit analysis for the Employment Authorization Document project, which has been in draft for over a year, should be expanded to ensure that it contains information needed to make informed decisions, including sufficient cost data for each alternative system. Rigorous cost-benefit analyses provide an organization with important information for determining whether it has selected the best alternative, identified project risks, and ensured an appropriate balance between benefits and cost.
- (4) INS should focus its performance goals and measures for IT projects more on mission-related outcomes and impacts. For example, the stated purpose of the ENFORCE project was to automate administrative enforcement processes previously performed manually by border patrol agents, thereby increasing the agents' availability to perform front-line enforcement activities. While INS' performance measures assess how much administrative time is saved through the ENFORCE automation, they do not determine whether this has resulted in any increased time spent on front-line enforcement activities. The establishment and use of appropriate performance measures can assist senior managers in making informed decisions and help ensure that IT projects are worthwhile and will provide mission benefits.

Once the IT investment strategy has been fully developed and implemented, we believe it should be incorporated into INS' policies and procedures in order to

- (1) provide clarity for all INS management staff involved in IT project decisions and
- (2) help ensure that a sound investment strategy is consistently applied.

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